

TITLE: Covering Coups in Saigon

AUTHOR: George W. Allen

VOLUME: 33 ISSUE: Winter YEAR: 1989

STUDIES IN INTELLIGENCE



A collection of articles on the historical, operational, doctrinal, and theoretical aspects of intelligence.

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~~SECRET~~*Keeping up with crises*

COVERING COUPS IN SAIGON

George W. Allen

The early 1960s were a tumultuous period for the CIA Station in Saigon. At a time when US policymakers yearned for a modicum of internal stability in South Vietnam, they were faced instead with a deteriorating political environment punctuated by successive changes in government. Beginning with the aborted coup by paratroop elements in November 1960, there were no less than a dozen different coups, minicoups, leadership shuffles, and rebellions in a five-year period. Through it all, the Saigon Station evolved rather effective means for covering these crises, rapidly and systematically getting on top of the often hectic developments and relaying timely and informative accounts to Washington.

Covering the rapidly shifting dynamic of a politically unstable situation can challenge even the largest and most sophisticated "news" organizations. CIA field stations are not in business, of course, to compete with or duplicate the flow of reports by the media. They are tasked rather to pull together an accurate and comprehensive picture of ongoing developments from knowledgeable, "inside" sources whose insights might help US policymakers understand the forces at play and to anticipate, if not influence, the outcome.

To do this, field stations have to be in a position to tap a wide variety of agents, informants, and other potential sources having access to leadership elements in all key political groups. They have to be able to track accurately the movements and actions of government security forces and potential rebel forces. They need to be able to organize and manage their collection activities in order to be able to follow up rapidly on leads that can—or should—be cross-checked with other sources. And they need the means to assemble this information rapidly at a central point, evaluate and collate it, and prepare it for transmittal to Washington in the form of spot reports or periodic situation summaries.

From the vantage point of one who was "in the loop" on most of these crises, either contributing to the Station's efforts in Saigon or conveying its products to policymakers and operating officials in the US, I believe the Saigon Station merits high marks for its coverage of these events during those years.

Abundant Assets

The breadth of the Station's contacts with key elements on the Saigon political scene was at the core of its success. In the Nho Dinh Diem era, it had close relationships with just about everyone of importance in the presidential palace and in the military and security services. Despite the rapid "platooning" of generals into the palace with successive coups after Diem's demise, the Station developed useful new assets with alacrity. When Buddhist dissidence became an issue in the spring of 1963, it acquired valuable assets in the rebellious temples. Flexibility, along with the dedication and hard work of a number of experienced and savvy case officers, paid off at crucial times.

Station contacts were sometimes embarrassingly extensive. In 1960, when paratroop battalions were laying siege to Diem's presidential palace in an attempted coup, a young and

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enthusiastic Agency officer who had worked with some of them in covert operations was sent to establish contact and report to the Station on their activities. Using the two-way radio in his jeep, which he parked at the paratroops' command post near the palace, he became a conspicuous go-between in Embassy efforts to restrain the paratroopers, whose delay in pressing their initial advantage allowed Diem to rally loyal divisions from neighboring provinces to put down the coup. Some observers believed that the young officer had been "directing" the coup forces, and he and his family had to depart quickly from Vietnam when the Diem government officials suggested they could "no longer guarantee his safety." Nonetheless, his efforts had enabled the Station to know in detail what the paratroopers were up to.

Flexible Communications

Radio-equipped jeeps were an invaluable supplement to the two-way radios permanently located by the Station at key sites in the Saigon area. It was this combination of fixed and mobile radio facilities that made possible both the rapid transmission of information to the Station and the management of many collection assets.

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(b)(3)(n) When a crisis occurred, the "net control" radio in the Station activated the net, and the outstations functioned as observation posts, reporting what they could see and being tasked accordingly. A number of Station jeeps and cars had two-way radios, and officers assigned these vehicles, alerted via phone, were dispatched to contact their assets or to proceed to critical locations and report what was happening.

With these collection assets, those on duty at the "command post" in the Station were able to follow quite readily the movements of government and rebel forces in the city. If a fixed observer reported a convoy of rebel forces moving down a particular boulevard, another observer might pick it up as it approached a key intersection. A mobile observer could be dispatched to check on its further movement and perhaps determine whether it had taken up positions outside the Post and Telegraph Building. An attempt might then be made to identify these forces, to fill in the picture of the size and composition of the rebel elements. Meanwhile, (b)(1) (b)(3)(n) might be queried—discreetly—to determine their intended reaction.

An Efficient System

The Station's command post was not rigidly structured. Operating under the general (b)(3)(c) supervision of the Chief of Station and/or his deputy, it was manned principally by the Reports (b)(3)(n) Section and augmented (b)(1) his assistant and by whatever assortment of (b)(3)(c) case officers might be available. Maps of the Saigon-Cholon area and its environs were used to plot the locations and movements of opposing (b)(3)(n) military and security forces, and order of battle lists were compiled to keep track of which side (b)(3)(c) the various units were supporting. Information obtained by various sources and observers was (b)(3)(n) funneled to the officers detailed to track the situation and to draft spot reports and situation summaries. Collection tasking was developed through an unstructured but generally smooth-flowing synergistic feedback process. New requirements were levied by radio or telephone to our collectors or led to visual reconnaissance missions by officers dispatched from the command post. There were always enough "veterans" of previous coup attempts on hand to provide stability and a leavening influence in the often exciting and stimulating atmosphere of a crisis. Through repeated practice, the process evolved into an efficient system for organizing the collection, collation, evaluation, and reporting of ongoing developments in what was often a rapidly moving situation.

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I had earned my first Vietnam coup "shoulder patch" as an analyst with Army Intelligence in the Pentagon during the infighting in 1955 that the US-backed Prime Minister Diem used to defeat a united front of French-supported sectarian paramilitary forces who were trying to unseat him. The Saigon Station, which under Colonel Ed Lansdale was deeply involved in the crisis, covered the action well. I remember moving through the corridors of the Pentagon with my well-marked briefing map to fill in the Army's top brass on the status of the machinegun at the "Y" bridge that was holding up Diem's forces at one crucial juncture.

On the morning in February 1962 when dissident Vietnamese Air Force officers decided to assassinate Diem, I was in Saigon on an extended TDY from DIA. I was eating breakfast on the roof of the Brink BOQ, only a half-mile or so from the presidential palace. After watching the planes drop their napalm and 500-pound bombs on the palace, and then rocket and strafe it in repeated passes, I sped to the Embassy in a taxi to draft an eyewitness account and send it via the Army Special Security Officer to Washington. Fortunately, before sending the cable, I phoned the intelligence staff at the US Military Assistance Command to compare notes, and discovered—to my chagrin—that the "four" planes I had observed in the attack were, in fact, only "two." Thus I reaffirmed that double-checking with others can usefully counteract the impact of adrenalin on the sensory systems of even experienced observers.

The Station's crisis reporting system performed splendidly in covering the momentous generals' coup that overthrew Diem in 1963. The generals had invited their designated Station liaison officer to join them at their command post at the outbreak of the coup. Information acquired because of his presence there, combined with that gleaned from the network of fixed and mobile observation posts and from Station contacts with other sources, enabled Saigon to keep Washington fully apprised of developments. We at Headquarters—which I had just moved to from DIA—were summoned in the early morning hours to follow the situation and prepare a briefing for DCI McCone to present at the White House at 0800. The ample flow of reporting from Saigon and the Station's responsiveness to our queries made our work a "piece of cake."

The minicoup the following January, which saw General Nguyen Khanh displace the older generals who had ousted Diem, was not as easy to fathom. Unlike the Diem coup, it came as a surprise. There was no serious fighting, however, and after a day or two of tension the new regime was in control. This coup featured the playing of martial music on the local radio stations and announcements on the US Armed Forces Radio urging all Americans to stay off the streets. In Saigon on TDY, I went to the Station, where I was drafted into the reporting team, contributing my own accounts of coup activities seen while en route and helping to prepare the situation reports.

(b)(3)(c) The next major government shuffle occurred in midsummer, shortly after I arrived on a
(b)(3)(n) two-year PCS tour at [redacted] As I emerged from Sunday church services in the USIS auditorium shortly before noon, I was trying to decide whether it was too hot to walk to the Embassy, where I was expected to check through the overnight traffic. Spying a large convoy of trucks coming up the boulevard carrying troops in field equipment, fixed bayonets, and wearing red bandannas—the "trademark" of Saigon coup forces, I immediately decided it was indeed "too hot" to walk. I took a cab and arrived at the Embassy in time to find I had brought in one of the initial reports that another coup attempt was under way. Having learned the Station's system and procedures, I was able to play a more useful role both in "anchoring" the reporting process and in guiding collection for this and subsequent coups during the remainder of my tour.

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Averting Other Coups

There could easily have been more coups than actually show in the historical record if dissaffected Vietnamese military commanders had not sometimes been restrained by their American contacts. One coup was headed off when the disgruntled commander of the corps in the Delta south of Saigon was talked out of marching on the capital when he phoned his Station contact to determine whether the US would approve his taking over the government. A US military adviser performed a similar service on another occasion.

One "coup that wasn't" led the Ambassador in August 1964 to order the departure of the legendary Lou Conein, the OSS veteran whose intimate relationships with most of the Vietnamese military hierarchy made him an invaluable resource during this period. Conein's downfall in 1964 was precipitated by the unscheduled midnight move of a couple of US Army armored personnel carriers through the streets of Saigon, without the Vietnamese MP escort called for by standard practice. The APCs were unable to find their way to the pier where they were to be outloaded for movement north, and they pulled up outside the entrance of the Headquarter's compound of the Vietnamese Navy, where Premier Khanh had secretly decided to spend the night. Khanh judged these vehicles to be precursors of a coup attempt; he alerted the US Ambassador, and he then fled by boat. The Ambassador alerted the Station Chief, who directed Conein to canvass his contacts to determine who might be "making the coup." Conein called each of his friends, which included most of the members of the top military leadership council, inquiring whether they were mounting a coup. When the generals met the next morning and compared notes, they wrongly concluded that the CIA had been trying to stir up a change of government, leading the Ambassador to decide that Conein had outlived his usefulness to the Station.

Chasing the Ky-Thieu Coup

I received word of the June 1965 coup, which solidified Generals Ky and Thieu at the top of the government and thus halted the coup carousel, while on a visit to Pleiku. The Station Chief, reaching me by phone in the office of the II Corps G-2 Adviser, told me of the coup and asked that I get back to Saigon as soon as possible to help with the Station's coverage of events. I was unable to reacquire my aircraft until mid-afternoon; by then, no aircraft were being cleared to land at Tan Son Nhut, the Saigon airport. We touched down briefly at Bien Hoa air base, but soon left when coup forces were reported preparing to attack that facility. We were finally able to land on the coast at Vung Tau, where I phoned the Station Chief to tell him [redacted] had offered to take me by boat to Saigon. The Chief of Station told me to stay away from him and all other senior Vietnamese military officers, because the US did not want to be perceived as playing favorites in this coup. On arrival at the local hotel, however, my colleagues and I found ourselves in the command post of the countercoup forces, which had commandeered the main lounge.

After spending the night at Vung Tau and finding that Tan Son Nhut was still closed, we flew back to Bien Hoa, where we hired a taxi to drive a group of us, all Station officers, to Saigon. As we approached the main bridge connecting Saigon with areas to the north, we overtook and passed a halted column of trucks and armored vehicles whose troops were wearing the red bandannas. At the crest of the bridge, we discovered why Vietnamese fighter bombers were "buzzing" the site; at the center of the bridge, there was the head of a similar column with troops wearing blue, or "loyalist" bandannas, in a direct faceoff with the head of the "red" column. Working our way gingerly past this confrontation, we finally arrived at the house of one of our officers in a suburb of Saigon, where I phoned to advise the Station Chief

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of my imminent arrival and described what we had seen at the bridge. He wearily replied that it was all over; an accommodation had just been reached between the opposing factions. He said that we should have lunch before checking in at the Embassy to assist with the wrap-up reporting on the coup.

Peace and Quiet

Aside from renewed Buddhist unrest and demonstrations, which led to little more than occasional whiffs of tear gas, there were no further coup attempts in Saigon for almost 10 years. The only major crisis of political instability took place in the northern provinces in early 1966, when the Saigon government had to suppress a rebellious corps commander who was involved in the Buddhist dissidence.

The Station's machinery for covering coups was finely tuned by the mid-1960s. Covering coups had become routine, and the Station took them in stride. By late 1964, Saigon veterans had devised a "coup-qualified" shoulder patch, and one wag wrote lyrics to a song titled "I Feel a Coup Comin' On." These efforts at black humor reflected a certain degree of frustration and exasperation at the fragility of the political foundation underlying the American effort in Vietnam. But these frustrations did not deter the Station from fulfilling its responsibility for collecting and reporting on the situation, with aplomb.

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